

Before Vincent van Gogh became an artist, he was a preacher in England and Holland. He became a preacher of the Gospel of his reading of the Bible, John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim Progress*, and *The Imitation of Christ* by Thomas à Kempis. Though he did serve in Borinage with humility and generosity, he did not focus on discipleship and on building a team of disciples who will do God's will on earth. Instead, he tried to do it alone and this is why he failed in Borinage. And this failure could have led to his becoming a painter.

While he was living and painting in the Yellow House in Arles, he desired to build a community of artists. He learnt the lesson in Borinage that one cannot thrive alone. This is a good aspiration but a true community of love, peace, joy, and creativity cannot exist without Jesus Christ being the center of it. The fellowship between him and the painter Gauguin did not last for their egos clashed against each other without the mediating and reconciling presence of God.

The two painters had two different concepts of how to paint. The difference can be summarized this way: Gauguin's aim was to paint with the "eye that hears" while van Gogh was to paint with the ear that sees. To pursue this goal, he took piano lessons in Nuenen from 1883 to 1885 to study sounds as colors. The relationship between the two concepts of "eye that hears" and "ear that sees" is a very interesting topic that will be discussed in the following videos.

van Gogh aspired to make a "church" of artists in the Yellow House. In fact, he bought 12 chairs for the house in association to Jesus' 12 disciples and repeatedly said that the large Sunflowers painting had 12 blossoms though it was really more. He also planned to paint 12 sunflower canvases. The artists were going to be disciples and apostles of a new religion.

Whether van Gogh initially thought of himself as the Christ of the new religion is not certainly known. But it is certain that van Gogh thought of himself as Christ after the conflict between him and Gauguin. He saw himself both as Christ and Malchus whose ear was cut off while Gauguin was both Judas and Peter. This mix-up of characters is a result of his deranged mind at that time. This is why after his mental breakdown and then confinement in a psychiatric hospital in Saint-Remy-de-Provence, he painted himself for the first and only time as Christ in *Pieta* (after Delacroix).

van Gogh also painted there the famous painting "Starry Night." Though there was no church with a steeple in that place during that time, he put it in the painting to function as an arrow pointing to a celestial swirl. This circular swirl signifies van Gogh's dream to build a church of artists. It is noticeable that the painting has 11 stars for the 12th one, Gauguin-Judas, had left. According to astronomical calculations, there was no crescent moon during the night he painted it. van Gogh put it in there as he had put the crescent moon in 3 other paintings. One can notice in these paintings that the moon is "facing" left and in two paintings are people in fellowship with one another. Thus, it can be concluded that the crescent moon points to Christ who is the creator of intimacy in life's journey and the destination of the journey. This insight can be more clearer if the crescent moon there is seen as Christ with His 11 disciples who abandoned Him while the missing one star is Judas who betrayed Him. That is why, in contrast to the other paintings that depict intimacy, the moon in the *Starry Night* is "facing" right for it is about the break up of intimacy. The moon is the abandoned Christ and the Christ in that painting is van Gogh.

Let us imagine that van Gogh had been able to build a team of disciples in Borinage for he focused to be with others in doing God's will and at the same time had succeeded in building a flourishing community of artists for Christ is its center in Arles and that these two tasks are one project in one place at the same time, then it could be said that he built the greatest church movement. However, it is Jesus alone who can build a great church.

During the time of van Gogh's mental breakdown, he gave to a woman his ear as a kind of sacred object to keep. There is a deep reason in this crazy deed, for indeed, his paintings, the objects he created by his hands were seen by his "ear that sees". The ear represents his paintings and his handing it to a woman for safe-keeping can be seen as a "prophetic" act because it was a woman, his wise

sister-in-law Johanna Bonger, who preserved his legacy that led to his worldwide recognition as a great artist after his death. For him, his paintings are holy bread to be given to the multitudes. Jesus ordained His body and blood of communion as a gift for healing, sanctifying strength, and growth in wisdom to be distributed to the multitudes. Is the church, His bride, performing this task wisely today?